



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Trempealeau *National Wildlife Refuge*

## Summary

*Draft*

## Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan

*June 2007*

### Introduction

Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) has prepared a Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) to guide Refuge administration and management for the next 15 years. The draft document integrates the components of a CCP, namely goals, objectives, and strategies, with the requirements of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), namely alternatives and consequences.

The purpose of the Draft EIS/CCP is to give everyone interested in the Refuge's future – neighbors, sports people, local government officials, the State of Wisconsin, and non-government organizations – an opportunity to review what the Refuge is proposing and to comment on the plan. Public involvement in the planning process is vital to making the CCP a meaningful document that addresses the needs of wildlife as well as the people who care about Trempealeau NWR.

The comprehensive conservation plan is intended to outline how the Refuge will fulfill its legal purpose and contribute to the National Wildlife



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Refuge System's wildlife, habitat and public use goals. The plan will articulate management goals for the next 15 years and specify the objectives and strategies needed to accomplish these goals.

While comprehensive conservation plans outline management direction, they do not constitute a commitment for staffing increases, operational and maintenance increases, or funding for future land acquisition.

### Where to Find the Draft EIS/ CCP

The Draft EIS/CCP is available in a variety of formats and places.

If you have access to a computer, you can see the plan in portable document format (pdf) at the Refuge's planning Web site:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/trempealeau>

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Paper copies and an electronic version of the plan are available at libraies throughout the area, including:

- Alma Public Library, 312 N. Main St, Alma, Wisconsin
- Galesville Public Library, 16787 S. Main St. Galesville, Wisconsin
- Holmen Branch – La Crosse County Library, 103 State St., Holmen, Wisconsin
- La Crosse Public Library, 800 Main St., La Crosse, Wisconsin
- Onalaska Branch – La Crosse County Library, 741 Oak Ave. South, Onalaska, Wisconsin
- Shirley M. Wright Memorial Library, 11455 Fremont St., Trempealeau, Wisconsin
- Whitehall Public Library, 36245 Park St., Whitehall, Wisconsin
- Winona Public Library, 151 W. 5th St., Winona, Minnesota

Limited numbers of paper copies are also available for individuals who want one. The Draft EIS/CCP is also available as a pdf document on a compact disk. To request a copy, please call the Refuge at 608/539-2311, extension 10.

## **Vital Statistics**

Trempealeau NWR was established by Executive Order in 1936 as “a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.” The 6,226 acre Refuge is a backwater of the Mississippi River and is strategically located within an important migration corridor, providing resting and feeding habitat for thousands of waterfowl and other birds during

spring and fall. The Refuge also includes more than 700 acres of native prairie and oak savanna, habitat types that are scarce in Wisconsin.

An estimated 70,000 visitors enjoy birding, hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, or photography at the Refuge. More than 2,000 young people learn about their environment each year through education programs. A dedicated force of volunteers contributes to the quality of the visitor experience, as well as successful habitat management.

Staff offices are located at the Refuge near the city of Trempealeau, Wisconsin. The Refuge is a unit of the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Complex with headquarters in Winona, Minnesota. There are currently four full-time permanent employees and a base annual budget of \$400,000.

## **Who We Are and What We Do**

The Refuge is administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), the primary federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing the nation’s fish and wildlife populations and their habitats. The Service oversees the enforcement of federal wildlife laws, management and protection of migratory bird populations, restoration of nationally significant fisheries, administration of the Endangered Species Act, and the restoration of wildlife habitat such as wetlands. The Service also manages the National Wildlife Refuge System, which was founded in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt designated Pelican Island in Florida as a sanctuary for Brown Pelicans.

Today, the Refuge System is a network of over 545 refuges covering more than 95 million acres of public lands and waters. Most of these lands (82 percent) are in Alaska, with approximately 16 million acres located in the lower 48 states and several island territories. Overall, the Refuge System provides habitat for more than 5,000 species of birds, mammals, fish, and insects. Refuges also provide unique opportunities for people. When it is compatible with wildlife and habitat conservation, they are places where people can enjoy wildlife-dependent recreation such as hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation.

## Refuge Vision Statement

Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge is enjoyed and appreciated by the people of America as a beautiful, scenic place where a diversity of native plants and animals thrive in healthy prairies, forests, and wetlands.

## Refuge Management Goals

The goals are designed to meet the purposes of the Refuge and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The following goals were established for Trempealeau NWR and will form the direction for the Refuge over the next 15 years.

### *Landscape*

We will strive to maintain and improve the scenic and wild character, and environmental health of the Refuge.

### *Wildlife and Habitat*

Our habitat management will support diverse and abundant native fish, wildlife, and plants.

### *Public Use*

We will manage public use programs and facilities to ensure sustainable, quality hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, interpretation, and environmental education opportunities for a broad cross-section of the public; and provide opportunities for the public to use and enjoy the Refuge for traditional and appropriate non-wildlife dependent uses that are compatible with the purposes for which the Refuge was established and the mission of the Refuge System.

### *Neighboring Landowners and Communities*

We will communicate openly and work cooperatively with our neighbors and local communities to help all benefit from the aesthetic and economic values of the Refuge.

### *Administration and Operations*

We will seek adequate funding, staffing, and facilities; and improve public awareness and support to carry out the purposes, vision, goals, and objectives of the Refuge.



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## The Planning Process

Scoping of issues began in September of 2002 with a public meeting in Centerville, Wisconsin, to identify issues. Key issues identified at the meeting and by Refuge staff were summarized in 12 “fact sheets” that provided the basis for discussion groups at an all-day workshop in March of 2003. Workshop participants were “managers for a day” making tough decisions about how to balance often conflicting Refuge uses. A website was maintained with up-to-date news about the process. Follow-up meetings with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and briefings with various commissions, associations, and Congressional offices occurred throughout the process.

Following public review and meetings on the Draft EIS, a Final EIS will be prepared. The Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Cities, Minnesota, will make a decision on which alternative in the Final EIS will become the Final CCP. This decision will be recorded in a formal Record of Decision included in the final documents. Substantive comments from the public, agencies, and other groups will be included in the Final EIS, along with a Service response.

## Issues Addressed in the Plan

Discussions with Refuge staff, staff in the Service’s Regional Office in the Twin Cities, and people who attended open houses and “Manager For a Day” meetings resulted in a list of issues that should be addressed in the comprehensive conservation planning process.



One of the biggest issues the Refuge faces is dealing with the main entrance road flooding every year. The access is closed for a period of months during the spring, which is also a prime time to see migratory birds on the Refuge. Staff would like to move the entrance to a site less prone to flooding, however there are archeological issues and land acquisition issues associated with moving the entrance.

The Refuge is also caught between budget restraints and increasing visitor services opportunities. One solution considered in this planning process is to start charging an entrance fee. Investigating the cost/benefit ratio of creating an entrance fee is proposed in the preferred management alternative.

Another issue for the Refuge and a near neighbor, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad, is how the Refuge deals with floodwater. The Refuge once allowed floodwater into the Refuge at the Railroad's request to protect a dike owned by the Railroad. The result was considerable damage to Refuge infrastructure with no real benefit to the dike. The Refuge is proposing a policy that would not allow diverting water to Refuge pools through the lower diversion dike structure, the Marshland Road inlet, or any other facilities.

Other issues include:

- The Refuge has acquired all but 340 acres within its approved acquisition boundary. Acquiring the land would help resolve problems with the existing entrance road as well as contribute to habitat restoration.
- About 20,000 cyclists ride the Great River State Bike Trail through the Refuge every year. The Refuge could improve its visibility with better signing and interpretive materials. The bike trail could also be improved by alleviating the spring flooding problem.
- Although Trempealeau NWR has been described as one of the most important archeological sites in the Midwest, the majority of the Refuge has not had baseline surveys and the locations and extent of archeological resources are unknown. Protection of the archeological resources is difficult, and habitat management is often delayed because of the need for site surveys. There is a long history of illegal collecting on the Refuge. The Refuge has

neither an Archeological Resource Protection Plan nor an inventory plan.

- The quality of Refuge wetlands is declining. Impounded wetlands are too stable and too deep to produce aquatic plants needed by wildlife, and plant growth is also hurt by invasive fish species, invasive plant species, and high sediment levels in water coming from upstream agricultural lands.
- Non-native pines, black locust, and other invasive shrubs are threatening to take over prairie habitats on the Refuge. Controlling invasive species is an ongoing, labor-intensive, and costly management challenge.
- Years of impoundment and stable water have created a fishery that is dominated by carp and other non-desirable rough fish.
- The Refuge needs to put more emphasis on endangered and threatened species.
- Wildlife diseases and their potential impacts on humans have been prominent issues. The Refuge needs to develop a Disease Contingency Plan to identify available resources and procedures for responding to disease outbreaks in wildlife.
- The Refuge would like to build an all-weather group teaching facility and restrooms to meet the increasing demand for formal environmental education programs.
- The Refuge needs to reconcile the public's desire for waterfowl hunting on the Refuge with the need to limit disturbance to wildlife and accommodate other visitor interests.
- As habitats improve and sport fish populations rebound, the Refuge will have



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to improve facilities such as boat ramps and fishing platforms to accommodate anglers.

- Interest in horseback riding on the Refuge is increasing, and there is potential for conflict with other visitors and damage to habitat.
- There is interest in opening areas to unleashed pets during the winter and for dog field trials on the Refuge. The Refuge needs to review current regulations and carefully consider the need to protect visitors and wildlife and public interest in training and exercising dogs.
- The Refuge needs to strengthen its connections to the local community.
- The Refuge would like to see a Friends Group form to lend support in voicing the need for protection, conservation, and enhancement of resources.
- Watershed improvement efforts would be strengthened with the participation of partners.
- Existing office, maintenance, and public use facilities are inadequate and need to be replaced.
- The Refuge needs more people to meet environmental education and biological program needs.

## What's Proposed

The Draft EIS/CCP proposes Alternative C: Integrated Public Use and Wildlife and Habitat Focus as the preferred alternative (see the next section for a summary of Alternative A and Alternative B.) Under the preferred alternative, the Refuge would increase the level of effort on fish and wildlife habitat management and take a proactive approach to visitor services management to ensure a diversity of opportunities for wildlife-dependent activities as well as traditional and compatible non-wildlife-dependent activities.

Briefly, these are the highlights of the proposed management direction:

### Wildlife and Habitat

The Refuge's role in protecting endangered or threatened species would improve through better monitoring of Bald Eagle nesting success and closing off a 100-meter radius around Bald Eagle nests. The Refuge would work closely with the



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Wisconsin DNR to assess the potential for reintroduction of Massasauga rattlesnakes in the River Bottoms Road area. Education and outreach on threatened and endangered species and their needs would increase.

The population of white-tailed deer would continue to be managed to maintain an acceptable level of browsing.

Trapping would continue to be a management tool for controlling muskrat, beaver and raccoon populations at levels where damage to dikes and interference with water management and bird banding operations is limited.

The Refuge's 335 acres of prairie habitat would be improved with the removal of all pine plantations from prairie units. Staff would use prescribed fire and expand the flea beetle release program to reduce leafy spurge in all prairie/oak savanna habitats. Volunteers and school groups would help staff collect and distribute native grass and wildflower seeds.

Refuge staff would treat 5 acres of upland and floodplain forest every year to remove black locust and European buckthorn. The Refuge would work with other organizations to research floodplain forest regeneration and restoration of forest habitats.

Water levels in impoundments would be less stable. Staff would lower water levels in various pools periodically to enhance plant growth, encourage white swamp oak growth, and reduce rough fish populations.

The Refuge would step up monitoring efforts by coordinating with U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), working with the Upper Mississippi River NW&FR



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biologist, partnering with colleges and universities to encourage research projects, and putting volunteers to work on wildlife surveys.

High school and university students would be encouraged to assist with research, wildlife surveys, and bird banding.

## **Visitors and the Refuge**

The preferred alternative emphasizes reducing conflicts between hunters and other visitors during the hunting season. The Refuge would require all pedestrians to wear blaze orange during the gun hunting season, and staff would investigate options for closing the Refuge to non-hunting visitors during key hunting times.

The Refuge would begin requiring hunters to report whether or not they were successful; the penalty for failing to report would be the loss of hunting privileges for 1 year.

Hiking trails, the auto-tour route and the observation deck would be improved.

The Refuge would be friendlier to bicyclists with improved directional signs and interpretation on the Great River Road trail. The Refuge would work with the Wisconsin DNR and the advisory committee on extending the trail while minimizing impacts to habitat. Bike racks would be added to the Marshland entrance and the main entrance, near the kiosk at the entrance to the auto-tour route, and at the observation deck.

Environmental education programming would increase. The Refuge would work with local teachers to develop grade-specific environmental education curricula that meets local, state, and national education standards. The Refuge would

continue to host River Education Days with fifth grade students from Minnesota and Wisconsin. In addition, the Refuge would promote collaboration and partnerships with area teachers, schools, colleges, and other wildlife agencies, among others, to increase environmental education opportunities focused on Refuge and the river corridor ecosystems.

Volunteers could play a bigger role on the Refuge. The Refuge would expand training opportunities and hope to increase volunteer hours and the number of volunteers by an average of 5 percent every year. New roles for volunteers might include leading interpretive programs and serving as docents. Volunteers would have roles in all programs – biology, visitor services, administration, and maintenance.

## **Neighbors and the Refuge**

Under the proposed management alternative, the Refuge would become a more active member of the community. Staff would work with community groups such as the Chamber of Commerce, the tourism board, libraries, the Great River Road Committee, and Perrot State Park to share resources and coordinate programming. When possible, staff would work with local area expositions, sportsman shows and other outdoor events to promote the Refuge. Staff would work with libraries to organize evening programs and set up seasonal displays.

The formation of a Friends Group would create additional links between the Refuge and the community.

## **Staff and Buildings**

The preferred alternative calls for the addition of three permanent seasonal positions: a park ranger, a biological technician, and a tractor operator. Two new full-time positions, one a law enforcement officer and the other a private lands biologist, would be shared with the Winona District of the Upper Mississippi River NW&FR.

New facilities are also proposed. By 2009, the Refuge would replace the existing shop with a building of similar size and construct a new 1,500-foot expansion to the office.

## **Around the Refuge**

More effort would be directed at protecting cultural resources. Archeological resources on Black Oak Island would be better protected with



increased law enforcement presence and by closing the island to unsupervised access. Staff would work with the Wisconsin DNR and Perrot State Park to protect cultural resources on Trempealeau Mountain. The Refuge would improve its relationship and coordination with the Mississippi Valley Archeology Center.

## Other Management Alternatives Evaluated

In addition to the preferred alternative described at length in the preceding section, two other alternatives were developed to address the variety of issues and opportunities facing the Refuge now and during the 15-year horizon of the CCP. These alternatives are summarized in the following sections. Alternative C is the Service's preferred alternative, however, the alternative that is ultimately selected could be any of the three considered here and may be modified to reflect the comments received on the Draft EIS/CCP.

### Alternative A: No Action (Current Direction)

Under this alternative, the Refuge would continue to manage habitat, wildlife and Refuge visitors just as they are currently managed. It is considered the base against which the other two alternatives are compared.

So how does the Refuge manage habitat, wildlife and visitors?

Trempealeau NWR maintains 335 acres of prairie and savanna using prescribed fire. In upland forests, Refuge staff are working to restore native species composition to both the understory and overstory by removing black locust, buckthorn, exotic elms, Siberian pea, and honeysuckle.

Refuge staff currently control invasive plant species in prairie, forest, and wetlands using biological controls, prescribed burning, and chemical and mechanical treatments. Biological controls are used to control leafy spurge and purple loosestrife, and staff use mechanical and chemical controls to limit the spread of black locust, Siberian pea, and exotic elm species.

Invasive animal species are also managed. Carp and other rough fish in Pool A are managed through commercial fishing. White-tailed deer numbers are managed through hunting, including a 9-day gun

season and a late archery season. Raccoon, muskrat, beaver, mink and opossum are managed through the existing trapping program.

Boundary issues are addressed as time and funding allow. There are 340 acres remaining within the approved acquisition boundary, and land is purchased as opportunities arise and funding allows.

There are limited opportunities for Refuge staff to lead programs for school groups, scouts, and other organized groups. Waterfowl hunting is limited to a program for physically disabled hunters. The Refuge is open to bank fishing and fishing from hand-powered or electric-motor-powered watercraft.

Hiking is allowed on all roads and trails.

The Refuge's entrance road would remain unchanged in Alternative A. The road is open to all traffic, however it is closed for an average of 6 weeks each year due to flooding.

There would be no change to the Refuge office under Alternative A, however the 70- year-old shop would be replaced.

### Alternative B: Wildlife and Habitat Focus

This alternative emphasizes minimizing disturbance to wildlife caused by public use and increasing the level of effort on fish and wildlife habitat management.

Boundary issues would be addressed with annual inspections, new surveying and installation of an automatic gate at the main entrance. The remaining 340 acres within the approved acquisition boundary would be purchased as opportunities arose.



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Habitat management would be a high priority. Invasive species control in the forested habitats would allow restoration of prairie and oak savanna. Pine plantations would be eliminated. Prairie habitat would increase to 585 acres.

Researchers would be actively sought to conduct research to determine effects of management strategies. Monitoring of grasslands, aquatic vegetation, and extent of invasive plant species would be conducted.

Additional dikes and water control structures would be placed within existing impoundments. The C2 impoundment would be divided into three separate units to allow for moist soil management. Three other impoundments would be carved out of Pool B to create manageable units as well as additional emergent habitat. Islands would be built in Pools A and B. Water level management in Pools A and E would continue on their present course. Rough fish would be intensively managed in all pools using commercial fishing and water level management.

The managed deer hunt would continue, but harvest levels would be regulated based on deer population and vegetation monitoring. Furbearer trapping would continue with harvest levels based on population estimates and habitat monitoring. No waterfowl hunting would be allowed. Public use opportunities would be reduced. Environmental education pro-

grams would be limited to those that explain Refuge regulations. To reduce disturbance to migrating birds, all pools would be closed to water craft during fall migration (from September 15 through November 15).

The Refuge would maintain its present entrance road, which is open to all traffic except for an average of 6 weeks each year when the road is flooded. The Refuge office would be unchanged, but the 70-year-old shop would be replaced.

## **Tell Us What You Think**

Trempealeau NWR and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service want the Refuge's comprehensive conservation plan to be a visionary and practical document that improves habitat for wildlife and connection to the environment for its visitors.

Your thoughts are an essential part of accomplishing this. Have we missed an issue? Is our intent to increase the level of effort on fish and wildlife habitat management while taking a proactive approach to visitor services management off the mark?

A 60-day public review period began with the release of the Draft EIS/CCP. In order for your comments to be considered during preparation of the Final EIS/CCP, we need to receive your comment by August 3, 2007.

You have a variety of opportunities to communicate your thoughts on the Draft EIS/CCP. First, you are welcome to write us a letter. Address written comments to:

Trempealeau NWR  
Attention: CCP Comment  
W28488 Refuge Road  
Trempealeau, WI 54661-8272

Comments are also welcome via e-mail: [r3planning@fws.gov](mailto:r3planning@fws.gov) (please specify "Trempealeau NWR Comment" in the subject line).

The Refuge will host an open house during the public review period and staff will be happy to talk to you about your ideas then. The date and location of the open house will be advertised in local media and will also be posted on the Refuge's planning website:

<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/trempealeau>